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"She was now afraid of everyone and everything" (Chukovskaya 92). Such was the experience of Sofia Petrovna, the protagonist of Lidia Chukovskaya's Sofia Petrovna, set in the highest years of Stalin's regime. Sofia's son is arrested, and she is caught up in the hellish existence of those who were left behind, those who were forced to remember. "Non-incarcerated family members effectively lived in prisons without walls," and Sofia's's prison, like that of so many other women at that time, became marked by the walls of her own mind (Adler 215). When Sofia finally cries out, saying "I can't stand it any more. . .I cannot, I cannot I can't possibly stand it any more" the tragedy is not in her loss and brokenness, though these are valid expressions of her condition (Chukovskaya 98). What is tragic about her confession is that she did not, and could not, identify what "it" represented. And for that reason, one cannot, with any confidence, identify oneself with this woman's experience of her own human self. To be a woman under Stalin's regime was to be a placeholder for an idea projected by others, embodying an identity determined by the other, who required and perpetuated her sense of alienation.

Strangely enough however, women were expected to, in a way, represent not just the conceptual ideal of femininity, but more importantly, the ideal Russian person. "Women modeled the ideal attitude of 'love, honor, and obedience'" (Reid 133). The truly worthy Soviet woman "was to place her traditionally 'feminine' skills as a caregiver, educator, and homemaker at the service of Soviet society as a whole. . . by overseeing standards of hygiene, decency, and kul'turnost' in the workplace" (Reid 154). After Sofia Petrovna had secured a stenographic job, she was made a member of the Mestkom, which "took up nearly all her evenings" (Chukovskaya 9). When Sofia's son Kolya was still living with her, he convinced her of "the necessity for women to do socially useful work," an idea strongly propagandized to the average Russian housewife, an idea Sofia seemed to have internalized (Chukovskaya 14). Sofia believes her son when he explains the reason for the arrest of, what seemed to Sofia to be, a perfectly harmless individual: "'She didn't recognize Mayakovsky as a poet. . .She's not a real Soviet person...'" (Chukovskaya 32). "Everything that was written in the newspapers now seemed to [Sofia Petrovna] completely obvious" (Chukovskaya 14).

Yet despite women's contribution to the well-ordered state, "envisaged as a disciplined and hierarchical family, with the people as Stalin's dutiful and loving children" (Reid 157), it was not long before the biological fathers began to disappear, leaving behind "women, women, women, old and young, in kerchiefs and hats, alone or with small children or babies. . .quiet, frightened, laconic women" (Chukovskaya 57). It was these very women who became the oral historians of not only their nuclear families, but also of the Russian people, Stalin's "little family." "Oral testimonies, on the whole, are more reliable than literary memoirs," and as a result, contemporary historians of the Stalinist regime have turned increasingly to oral history as a window on questions of identity (Figes 128, 119).

In her introduction to Sofia Petrovna, Chukovskaya explains to the reader the nature of her novel, describing it as not so much a story as "a piece of evidence, which it would be dishonorable to destroy" (Chukovskaya 1). She asks the reader to let her "Petrovna speak today as a voice from the past, the tale of a witness striving conscientiously, against the powerful forces of falsehood, to discern and record the events which occurred before his eyes" (Chukovskaya 2). Chukovskaya does well to literarily transform "herself from victim into important witness" (Clements 278). The issue

with her objective, however, is not just her unfortunate use of phallocentric language. More problematic is the class bias of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where the intelligentsia and middle ranks of Russian society "expressed 'a telling lack of respect for the preferences of the lower classes' in their cultural projects and ambitions" (Holmgren 92). One must also take into consideration the fact that memoirs written by intellectual emigres from the Soviet Union and Soviet survivors were often written for a specific audience. In the West, these memoirs were "widely greeted as the 'authentic voice' of 'the silenced', which told. . .what it had 'been like' to live through the Stalin Terror as an ordinary citizen" (Figes 117). While one should not assume that Chukovskaya intended to misrepresent the average Russian person, the fact remains that the story of Sophia Petrovna was not, in fact, her own. Furthermore, Chukovskaya's purpose in writing the novel was "to help to reveal the causes and the consequences of the great tragedy the people had suffered" (Chukovskaya 1). However, while her words do, with integrity, identify her as a member of "the intelligentsia strongly committed to the ideals of individual liberty," "they do not speak for the millions of ordinary Soviet citizens. . .who did not share this inner freedom or feeling of dissent" (Figes 118).

The ordinary Soviet citizen, "on the contrary, silently accepted and internalized the system's basic values, conformed to its public rules, and perhaps even collaborated in the perpetration of its crimes" (Figes 118). At one point in *Sofia Petrovna*, she approaches the wife of her former director as they wait in line for information. The wife tells Sofia that her husband has received ten years at remote camps, and Sofia reacts. "'Then he was guilty after all. I never would have believed it. Such a nice person,' thought Sofia Petrovna . . . 'They won't send my son away,' said SP apologetically. 'You see, he's not guilty. He was arrested by mistake.'" The director's wife responds by laughing, retorting that everything around them was "by mistake" (Chukovskaya 74-5). Later, Sofia confronts her son's friend Alik on his comparison of Kolya to others who had been arrested. "'After all Kolya was arrested through a misunderstanding, but the others...Don't you read the newspapers, or what?'. . .She had been quite right to keep aloof from her neighbors in the lines. She was sorry for them, of course, as human beings, sorry especially for the children; but still an honest person had to remember that all these women were the wives and mothers of poisoners, spies, and murderers" (Chukovskaya 60).

Sofia persists in her belief that there has been a misunderstanding. She assumes that if the authorities and representatives of the Soviet regime were to understand, they would come to agree with her conclusion. She maintained her "fundamental faith" in socialism's "inherent superiority" (Adler 220), despite its sustained failure to return to her that which she most desired: her son. Sofia's belief was sustained by social consensus and validation, which told her that "'nothing can happen to an honest man in our country'" (Chukovskaya 36-7). Consequently, Sofia concludes that "nothing happens without a reason. . .[Kolya] must have put someone's back up" (Chukovskaya 58-9). Her fellow children of Stalin consist of the entirety of the Russian population, serving to cement Sofia's "subjective confidence in the validity of the belief" (Adler 224). The ever-present propaganda motivated the Russian working class towards conformist behaviors, and thus "what might have begun as a functional, pragmatic, or coercive conformity would have a tendency to be propelled by cognitive dissonance from 'adapting to' toward 'adopting of' a belief system" (Adler 230, 224). Sofia, driven by cognitive dissonance, supported her faith in the rightness of Stalin's system by refusing to fault the system itself, instead reinterpreting her experience as a misunderstanding, a "perversion of an inherently good ideology" (Adler 219), later even admitting that her son must have done something wrong. Yet this explanation cannot fully capture Sofia's experience, nor does it give us experiential understanding of her necessary alienation, from herself and from others.

A single story, one might argue, may not provide the fullest expression of a Russian, working-class woman, but it certainly can do no damage as "anecdotal evidence" to supplement and corroborate the oral narratives of survivors. However, even if one's objective is to get at what "really

happened," to ask Russian survivors about their experience will not necessarily yield fully trustworthy accounts. In post-Soviet Russia today, there is "an increasing trend to repress the memory of repression. . .reinforced by nostalgia for a selectively edited history" (Adler 229). Those who have experienced trauma will usually block out portions of their own past and, having no "clear conceptual grasp of their own experience," they have no way of making sense of their memories" (Figes 128, 127). To fill these mental voids, the oral historians of the country, the women, would do a number of things. Many "made up their own narratives, their own myths of the 'happy family life' or the 'good father' that was lost" (Figes 123). More victims of Stalinist repression, however, seeking to contextualize their experiences within a meaningful, broader narrative, located their life-stories in the safety of collective narratives (Figes 126). When asked to describe their experiences, women would offer "family chronicles" and "documentary tales" that were virtually identical to the narratives of others (Figes 129). This seems to have developed out of a radical reshaping of one's memories. It was not uncommon for the victims of repression to substitute others' coherent and clear memories for their own, which became so fully internalized out of the need for meaning that many oral historians would insist "on their version of events," even after being confronted with physical evidence that they must be wrong (Figes 124).

It is this extraordinarily strong experience of cognitive dissonance that should force one to withdraw any absolute conclusions regarding the nature of a Russian woman's experience. It is almost as if those who were aware of what was happening could articulate only their autonomous experience of those who were truly experiencing the terrors of Stalin's regime, who in turn could not articulate these experiences without using and internalizing the accounts of the other. Within the conceptual framework of the nation's memory-keeper, there was no reason to seek an understanding of her experience, which would have required that she let go of a tightly-held belief. There was nothing to understand. A woman's sense of self was insignificant, unless it identified so fully with Stalinist ideology that the very idea of being individuated was as absurd as it was immoral. Sofia's distressed confusion over how Kolya, the "irreproachable Komsomol member," could have possibly confessed a crime he could not have committed brings her to the point where "she had to decide, she had to think," but instead sat by the window, thinking of nothing. She seems to go mad. At the end of the novel, Sofia burns Kolya's letter; the reader is left with the image of a flame being thrown on the floor and stamped out (Chukovskaya 87, 108-9). There is no closure for her—only an act of necessary, ideological obedience to eliminate irreconcilable evidence. She chose to relinquish the right to her own life; to speak would have been to reject and be rejected by society, to disobey and displease the father of the country. After all, Father knew best.

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